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ABSTRACT

With the shift to larger units of administration in Ontario, there is a need for the realization of a working relationship between the two roles of administrator and trustee, based on the strengths of each. The strength of the administrator is in his skills as manager and coordinator and communicator and in his ability to communicate on a technical level with the centers of power in education, namely, the Ministry of Education and the professional staffs. The strength of the trustee is in his position of elected representative of the community, as a translator of the community needs, as the ultimate payer of the bills. The point of articulation, therefore, is in the relationship between trustees and administrators. (Author)

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Trustees and Administrators

The Case for a Working Relationship

by Edward S. Hickcox

March 1973

I. Introduction

Since the reorganization of school districts into larger units of administration in 1969, we have urged by means of papers, seminars and workshops of various kinds the establishment of a relationship of mutual trust and confidence between trustees and officials. We have discussed, in this regard, relationships among the community, the board and the school system itself. Administration in this approach provides the linkage between board and school system. We have examined the policy function of trustees and the administrative function of officials, and we have noted specific points where these overlap. We have discussed the responsibility of trustees for developing general purposes and objectives, and the responsibility of professionals for designing specific objectives and goals, for creating programs to meet these objectives, and for carrying through an evaluation process to ensure that basic controls remain with elected trustees.

Our purpose now is to examine the relationship between trustees and officials in terms of the ideal model, and to suggest directions in which the relationship may move in response to changes in the community and in society at large.

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II. Mutual Trust and Confidence

Despite the attractiveness and neatness of the general model and the basic assumption, we cannot see much evidence that conditions surrounding

the responsibilities of trustees and officials are conducive to the carrying out of functions in a climate of mutual trust and confidence. When we examine what has happened since the creation of larger units of administration relative to the trustee role, we note the following:

1. School systems are large and complex in terms of size and diversity of program.
2. Officials have organized themselves very quickly into a body which is beginning to speak powerfully as a single voice on important educational matters.
3. With the institution of financial ceilings, decision-making on matters involving money has essentially shifted away from local boards of education.
4. Teachers have become more militant on a Provincial basis and are moving rapidly beyond the area of salaries in their demands to school boards.
5. The Ministry of Education, although it has relinquished authority over curriculum content specifically and over the inspectorial function, has, as a result of the larger units and the fiscal restraints among other factors, tightened its control over the expansion of facilities, the certification of both teachers and officials, the structure of programs (through HS 1 and P_1J_1), the administration of ceilings and other functions.

On the face of it at least, the role of the trustee has become less vital in the past four years while the importance of the role of officials and the role of the Ministry of Education has stayed the same or increased. We should emphasize here that this shift in the relationships among boards,

officials and government is not the result of some sinister plot on the part of a power hungry group of greedy men. On the contrary, many officials and government personnel have indicated in a number of ways a genuine desire to maintain a strong role for trustees. But for a variety of reasons, the situation has deteriorated from the trustee point of view.

To support this statement, we suggest that no school board in the Province can dismiss an official for any except the most fundamental of causes, and then only with a great deal of difficulty. The freedom to hire officials is severely circumscribed to those who have been approved by the Ministry of Education. No board can spend more money than is permitted by the ceilings, even though the community it represents desires and needs such expenditures. No buildings can be built or renovated without scrutiny and approval of the strictest kind from a higher authority in government. Given the larger systems, which require professional judgment on most matters, trustees are no longer directly involved in hiring teachers, or in developing new courses of study (they may approve them in an overall sense.) In short, beyond a number of meetings which trustees are expected to attend, there is some question about just what they do which warrants their continuance as an institution.

At the same time, the role of administration has become stronger and more vital compared to what it was. There are fewer officials, for one thing, and they are beginning to communicate with each other through an effective professional organization. Since systems are large and complex, the full time professional has become crucial to the functioning of the organization, especially in terms of financial and program planning over

the long range. With the influence of the Ministry increasing, it is the officials rather than trustees who have access to information at the Ministry. After all, many current officials once worked for the Ministry, and current Ministry employees tend to be ex-administrators. There is a natural supportive relationship.

If this is the current situation relative to the role of trustees and administrators, what does it mean for the relationship between the two? What we hear frequently is a chorus of rhetoric from government, administrators and universities about the warm and friendly feelings we all have for trustees. We like to tell you how important you are and how vital you are to the democratic process. We speak about the maintenance of local autonomy and the individuality of local systems.

It is relatively easy, therefore, for officials and outsiders to promote a climate of mutual trust and confidence with trustees. From the point of view of trustees, there is not all that much at the present time to be mutual about. In the original concept of mutual trust and confidence, there was the notion of exchange, the notion that both trustees and officials had something of significance to contribute to decision making and that a cooperative attitude was the best means for increasing effectiveness.

In all candidness, we must say that the exhortation to a relationship of mutual trust and confidence between trustees and officials is a poor deal for trustees unless there is to be a sharper deliniation of the function of trustees in larger units of administration, and a clear statement as to powers of the local boards. Such a clarification is needed, also, for officials whose role as employee of the board and appointee of the Ministry creates confusion for individuals who do not know, really, to

whom they are ultimately responsible. It is a classic case of role conflict.

We grant that expertise of necessity lies with officials. We know that trustee tenure, in many cases, will be far shorter than that of officials. And we hope that the move to create full time trustees is a long way off. Given the general situation, then, our task is to suggest that some clarification of the role of trustees and officials is necessary, and some changes in the thinking of trustees about the governance of education is a necessary prelude to changes in structure and behavior which will permit a balanced relationship to return in the complex interactions among communities, trustees, officials and the Ministry of Education.

At the moment, the trustee is getting the short end of the stick.

III. The Administrative Function

Reorganization has mandated some tremendous changes in the role played by senior officials in our school systems. The role now requires some of the following:

1. A management orientation and an organizational emphasis.

   Senior officials these days are responsible for multi-million dollar operations, with hundreds of employees and great pressures from a multitude of external forces. The administrator whose conception of educational leadership emphasizes that what he is essentially is a successful teacher who knows what is best for the kids is doing a disservice to the community, the board and the students; trustees should no longer tolerate this attitude.

   Instead, what trustees need to look for in officials is knowledge and training in organizational problems, financial

management, planning, personnel management and the broader aspects of educational policy. Some few individuals possess these skills by nature, but for the majority of administrators training is required and support from trustees for the development of a broad concept of educational leadership is necessary.

2. Commitment to the idea of the Executive Team.

One of the great myths about decision making in large organizations is that it is something an individual does. In reality, decision making is a process which consists of a number of steps carefully considered. It is only the newspapers which play it up as a dramatic act on the part of a great man. The weight of research, wise thinking, and common sense says that the best decisions are made by groups of knowledgeable people. The skill of administration is the ability to delegate to the proper individuals the authority to take action. Responsibility, in this sense, always remains with the man at the top.

The Executive Team in a modern school system in Ontario should consist of the senior officials in the system who meet regularly and consider all relevant information on problems at hand. This team must include the business administrator who, in the best systems, has a genuine educational orientation. He's part of the team. No significant decision is taken these days without financial implications, and it follows that the expertise of the business administrator is crucial on educational decisions.

Trustees should consider also that the general movement these days is toward an increase in the autonomy of individual schools.

Perhaps, then, principals should have representation directly on the Executive team. It is a courageous board which would take this step.

3. Performance as an educational statesman.

This is a fuzzy concept but a useful one taken in the right context. What it means is that the chief official of a large board of education develops his organization to the point where he can concentrate on major issues. There isn't an administrator in the Province who is not overworked. The question which trustees should ask is what is he doing? The official as statesman is one who has a Provincial (in the broad sense) outlook, who has wide contacts, who writes, who accepts responsibilities in the community and in the Province.

IV. The Trustee Function

We turn now to the role of trustee in large school systems, a role which, in our view, has been eroded since 1969 to the point of danger.

The first point to be made is that the trustee is the translator of general community needs for education. Somehow the trustee has to have the pulse of the community, an extremely difficult task given the size of the constituency. The great problem for trustees in this regard is how to deal with special interest groups. The French community clamors for more French. The Special Education group wants attention. Parents clamor for more transportation. We've got to have junior kindergartens in every school.

The task of sorting all this out suggests that trustees need to spend a large amount of energy in the community, and perhaps less in meeting

with groups from within the school system. If, in fact, trustees have insisted on a smoothly functioning administrative structure, then they can minimize meetings with professional groups since their ideas and concerns would automatically be communicated through regular meetings with officials. It is, after all, the trustees who will marshall community support for education.

The second point concerns the function of the trustee as a member of the Board of Education. Given the previous point, we can suggest that the amount of time spent in committee meetings with staff members on essentially administrative problems should be minimized. We know that there have to be committees, but their functions should not dominate all aspects of trustee work. The key function is to operate as a corporate board at the regular monthly meetings. One board we know of in this Province has thirty-five standing and ad hoc committees to which trustees and officials belong. Officials like this because energies of trustees are diverted from broad issues into administrative problems where officials have the advantage. Many of these problems are interesting and absorbing, but they are not central to the role of trustee. For example, an inordinate amount of time is taken up in committees dealing with transportation problems, even to the point of determining bus routes and places where buses may or may not stop.

The third point about the role of trustees is most crucial. Given the erosion of the trustee role since 1969, it appears that a paramount task for trustees in 1973 is to maintain a position as the guardian of local control and the reflector of community needs in the face of a genuine shift of power to the professionals and to the central authority.

Put bluntly this means, as we have suggested previously, that less energy should be expended in administrative tasks at the system level and more at exerting influence where the real decisions are made, namely at the Provincial level in government, the teachers' organizations and the administrators' organizations.

How can this be done? No pat answers are possible, but here are some general directions which can be considered.

1. Increased support for the Provincial trustees' organizations.

Outsiders looking in at how trustees conduct their Provincial affairs are impressed, on the whole, with the amount of good work produced with an extraordinarily small amount of resources. But given the necessity to operate effectively at the Provincial level with other organizations whose coffers tend to be a bit fuller creates problems. It means, for example, the OSTC and its constituent organizations must rely heavily on volunteer help and contributions to put on conferences such as this, to engage in research and to promote the trustees' viewpoint to the Province.

Support of another kind is essential, too. It is essential that trustees speak with a united voice on basic questions of educational policy. Since there are several trustees' organizations, there is always the danger of working at cross purposes when the need is for concerted effort on common objectives.

2. Questioning of some basic assumptions.

We are talking in this conference a lot about local autonomy. At the same time, we have embraced the concept of equalization of educational opportunity. We must realize that, in one sense, equalization by its very nature restricts the exercise of local autonomy. In practice, this

can occur if a substantial measure of flexibility in decision-making, including financial decision making, is not safeguarded for the local board. We are not sure, in specific terms, whether these safeguards currently exist in Ontario. In fact, there is some evidence to suggest that they do not exist in sufficient measure.

Trustees could by collective action force a clear definition of the meaning of local autonomy and could suggest that the concept of equalization of educational opportunity given scarce resources requires clarification and modification. This cannot be done by one board complaining about the restrictions of the ceilings but only by collective action, based on clear mandates from individual communities.

3. Relationships with the Ministry of Education.

It would be easy and even tempting to launch into a polemic against the Ministry of Education as the real villain behind all of our problems in education. But, whereas the Ministry should receive its share of constructive criticism, it is of course not true, as we have indicated previously, that the Ministry is behind a calculated plot to take over education. On the contrary, the motives of Ministry personnel are the same as those of any of us in education, to promote and foster the best educational system possible. That the Ministry falls short in performance on occasion is not a characteristic unique to that group of individuals. It must, also, clarify its own position, and its own role and mission, and, even though such deliberations are not likely to be subject to public scrutiny, we are reasonably sure they occur on some sort of systematic basis.

We would like to discuss one interesting aspect of the trustee

relationship with the Ministry, however, Responsibility for education is reserved to the Province. The Province has delegated authority to local boards, and in this sense, the local boards are extensions of the government. Thus it seems logical that local boards should be the agency through which Provincial policy is channeled, and that boards should argue for a political partnership in broad areas of educational policy making.

Some moves in this direction are evident, as witness the recent meetings between the Minister of Education and board chairmen at which officials were not represented in any formal sense.

V. A Working Relationship

We have described so far a changed role for both officials and trustees in the larger units of administration. The real key to the achievement of effectiveness is not by a reiteration of the concept of mutual trust and and confidence, a tired term at best, but by the realization of a working relationship between the two roles, based on the strengths of each.

The strength of the administrator is in his skills as manager and coordinator and communicator, and in his ability to communicate on a technical level with the centers of power in education, namely the Ministry of Education and the professional staffs.

The strength of the trustee is in his position as elected representative of the community, as a translater of community needs, as the ultimate payer of the bills, no matter whether the money comes from local taxes or from Provincial grants.

The point of articulation, therefore, is in the relationship between trustees and administrators. A common front, based on positions of power, between trustees and officials could work to the betterment of education

in Ontario. But the burden is on trustees to assume the power, not in opposition to administrators but in cooperation with them.

In the past two years, many of us have been brainwashed into the idea that education as an institution has had its day in our society and that other priorities are now paramount. We cannot accept this viewpoint without a struggle. We must hold to the view and the hope that, despite problems and inadequacies, the progress of our society and the promise of the future lies in the allocation of our best minds and our greatest resources to the education of our children.